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**Saltlick, Tractor Operator**  
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## Cows Like Saltlick

Eugene alt-country band turns its *Face* to the world.

**A**fter being a band for five years — in various incarnations — Saltlick is just getting around to releasing a record. Which is understandable given the many musical endeavors of the band's members: Drummer Scott Headrick and bassist Jerry Abelin also play with John Shipe; guitarist Chris Ross is the singer-songwriter in Hot for Chocolate (and a DJ at John Henry's infamous '80s night); and keyboard player Ryan Tocchini is the singer-songwriter for Arse. Welcome to Eugene: Where one band is never enough.

The exception to the multi-band rule seems to be Saltlick's own singer and songwriter, Steve Taddei, who used to be in the memorably named Hillbilly Holocaust. "A lot of people remember the name of that band and not so much the band," says Headrick. When Hillbilly Holocaust split up, the band's two main songwriters went in different directions. "Sort of like the Uncle Tupelo story. We sort of turned into Son Volt," Headrick says, though he wasn't in the band at the time. He and Abelin came along later, after Taddei had formed and then broken up his band. "We just forced ourselves as a group on Saltlick," Headrick says, adding that they already knew the songs from being fans. Taddei called up Ross and Tocchini, and Saltlick (v. 2.0) was set.

*A Face Only a Mother Could Love*, the band's debut CD, is a self-produced, self-released slice of compelling, thoughtfully crafted songwriting wrapped in deft performances from the band members and guest musicians Alexis Stevens (keyboards

and vocals) and Ehrin Ebbage (guitar). Taddei leads the band through songs that, like those of Wilco or early Ryan Adams, romp through multiple genres on their way to a solidly alt-country sound. Asked what the band members would compare their music to, Headrick says Taddei sums it up with "Steve Earle meets Pavement."

*A Face* was recorded mostly live, in the band's rehearsal space, with a few additional tracks mixed in later. Traffic outside the Buy and Sell (where Headrick and Taddei work) and bar chatter from the Horsehead make cameos; Headrick says the band recorded "samples of all of the spaces that inspired creativity." "Slow Eye," which begins delicately melancholic but breaks into a determined chorus, is a standout track, as is "Barstool." Taddei's twangy, Jay Farrar-like voice, a dancing piano line and the wiry tones of a pedal steel guitar add to the bittersweet feel as Taddei follows up "She's got a heart the size of Texas," with "But that ain't no defense," a lyrical couplet that seems to set the tone for much of the album.

Saltlick is about to head out on tour for *A Face*, the first time the band has ventured beyond Portland — where they just played for the first time last month. "The band just sort of got better, so the other members have just started to be excited about it and be open to making it more of a priority," Headrick says about the band's new ventures. It all begins at Sam Bond's Garage this Friday, with Tractor Operator (former Pellet Gun member Eric Jensen's new project) on first. **EW**

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